

Message Text

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SUBJECT: TUMULTUOUS START TO NEW NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY
SUMMARY:

THE FIRST MEETING OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY ENDED IN UPROAR AS THE LOYALIST COALITION AND UNPLEDGE UNIONISTS TOOK OVER THE CHAMBER AT STORMONT AFTER REFUSING TO ACCEPT ADJOURNMENT, CONTINUING WITH AN UNOFFICIAL MEETING OF ITS OWN TO CENSURE THE NEWLY-APPOINTED PRESIDING OFFICER, MR. NAT MINFORD, OFFICIAL UNIONIST.

1. MR. NAT MINFORD, OFFICIAL UNIONIST, 60 YEARS OLD, FORMER LEADER OF THE OLD COMMONS AT STORMONT, WAS ELECTED PRESIDING OFFICER (SIMILAR TO THE SPEAKER IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS) OF THE ASSEMBLY BY A VOTE OF 31 TO 26, DEFEATING REV. WILLIAM BEATTIE OF THE DEMOCRATIC UNIONIST PARTY. THE SDLP (19 MEMBERS) ABSTAINED FROM THE VOTE FOR PRESIDING OFFICER, CLAIMING THE POSITION OF PRESIDING OFFICER SHOULD BE TEMPORARY AS THEY WERE NOT AWARE OF THE FULL EXTENT OF THE POWERS AND PRIVILEGES OF THE ASSEMBLY. ONE ASSEMBLY MEMBER WAS ON VACATION AND ANOTHER (UNIONIST) WAS RECENTLY KILLED IN AN AUTOMOBILE ACCIDENT,
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ALLIANCES EIGHT VOTES IN SUPPORTING THE UNIONIST NOMINATION

WERE CRUCIAL IN THE ELECTION OF MINFORD AS THE HARD-LINE LOYALISTS LED BY PAISLEY AND CRAIG, WHICH INCLUDED DUP, VUPP AND UNPLEDGED UNIONISTS, HAD FORMED A VOTING BLOC OF 26 SEATS.

2. ALTHOUGH IT WAS AN AFTERNOON OF DISRUPTION AND ARGUMENT DOMINATED BY THE LOYALISTS, WITH THE OFFICIAL UNIONISTS AND SDLP HARDLY SPEAKING, THE TURMOIL BEGAN WHEN MINFORD TOOK HIS CHAIR TO READ WHITELAWS DIRECTIVE THAT A COMMITTEE WOULD BE SET UP BY THE PRESIDING OFFICER TO RECOMMEND STANDING ORDERS FOR THE ASSEMBLY. THE PARTIES WERE INVITED TO NOMINATE MEMBERS FOR COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP, AND MINFORD WOULD THEN SELECT THE COMMITTEE FROM THE NOMINATIONS WITH HIS SELECTION GOING BACK TO THE ASSEMBLY FOR APPROVAL. IMMEDIATELY CRAIG PAISLEY AND BEATTIE PROTESTED, ATTACKING THE VALIDITY OF WHITELAWS DIRECTIVE. CRAIG PROPOSED A MOTION OF CENSURE FOR REFUSAL TO ALLOW THE ASSEMBLY TO ELECT THE MEMBERS OF THE STANDING ORDER COMMITTEE. AFTER THE ATTEMPTED CENSURE, WHICH MINFORD REFUSED TO ACCEPT, THE ASSEMBLY WAS ADJOURNED AMID CONFUSION, TO A DATE TO BE NAMED LATER. THE INAUGURAL MEETING LASTED 4 HOURS.

3. IT WAS AT THIS POINT THE LOYALIST-UNPLEDGED UNIONIST VOTING BLOC (26 MEMBERS) INSTALLED BEATTIE IN THE PRESIDING OFFICERS CHAIR AND HELD THEIR OWN UNOFFICIAL MEETING, AFTER THE DEPARTURE OF THE OTHER ASSEMBLY MEMBERS, PROCEEDING TO PASS THEIR "CENSURE MOTION" AND ESTABLISHING A SPECIAL COMMITTEE TO DRAW UP THEIR OWN STANDING ORDERS. THE BREAKAWAY MEETING WAS THEN ADJOURNED TO SEPTEMBER 4 WHICH WOULD GIVE THEM TIME TO TAKE LEGAL ADVICE ON WHITELAWS DIRECTIVE ON THE FORMATION OF THE COMMITTEE, AND THEY CLOSED AFTER 40 MINUTES WITH THE SINGING OF "GOD SAVE THE QUEEN."

COMMENT: CHAOTIC DEVELOPMENTS AT THE ASSEMBLY WERE REGARDED AS A BLOW TO THE PROSPECTS OF THE NEW ASSEMBLY ESTABLISHING A NORMALLY ACCEPTABLE POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION IN THE NEAR FUTURE AND TO THE SUCCESS OF POWER SHARING. ALTHOUGH THE LOYALIST BLOC ACTION WAS CONSIDERED TO BE LITTLE MORE THAN A PUBLICITY STUNT AND SHOW OF STRENGTH, IT OVERSHADOWED THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF ELECTING A PRESIDING OFFICER: NEVERTHELESS, THERE WAS CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM THAT WHEN THE ASSEMBLY REASSEMBLES, IT COULD GET DOWN

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TO SERIOUS BUSINESS.
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